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# The Perils of Proclaiming an Authentic Organizational Identity

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**Abstract:** An emerging body of research consistently demonstrates that individuals in developed consumer markets value authenticity. But how individuals respond to organizations that tout their identities as authentic is not so well understood. We argue that organizational attempts at explicitly proclaiming their own identity as authentic will generally be regarded by individuals with skepticism and devaluation. Across two studies with different research designs, we find consistent empirical evidence that individuals devalue organizations making identity self-claims of authenticity. The first study analyzed authenticity claims made in the texts of menus from 1,393 restaurants in Los Angeles and their corresponding 450,492 online consumer reviews recorded from 2009 to 2016. The second study used a controlled, minimalistic experimental setting with fictitious restaurant menus that examined reactions to generic authenticity self-claims. The findings illuminate how individuals respond to organizational identity claims about authenticity and raise interesting questions about other types of identity claims.

**Keywords:** authenticity; organizational identity; self-claims

At least since Goffman (1963), sociologists have been interested in the social identities of organizations—how they are formed, maintained, and perceived by others. This study follows in this tradition by examining reactions of individuals elicited by the varying ways that organizations depict themselves as authentic in their identity claims. To appreciate the range of individual reactions to various self-presentations of organizational identity, consider two Mexican restaurants in Chicago and their online reviews.

Pancho Pistola's is located on 31st Street in Bridgeport on the South Side. Owned and operated by the Garcia family since 1997, Pancho Pistola's announces itself on the web and on its menu as an "authentic Mexican restaurant" that takes "great pride in serving up only the most authentic Mexican fare." House specialties include fajitas, carne asada o pollo la tampiqueña, and coctel de camaron. What are labeled Mexican favorites include steak and pepper burritos and fried ice cream. The menu also lists a number of Mexican items familiar to most Americans, including tacos, tostados, guacamole, tamales, gorditas, chimichangas, and chile rellenos.

Frontera Grill, the second restaurant, is located at 445 Clark Street, near the city's center. Its website also shows several familiar Mexican items but then also some unexpected fare such as oysters and ceviche. A section named "Mexican Street Food" is comforting because it lists tacos and enchiladas. Also listed are a host of salads and vegetable dishes, followed by moles and pipianes, and an entire section labeled "Live Fire Entrée" before the Daily Specials. All of this food is presented by chef-owner Rick Bayless and his wife Deann Groen Bayless. It looks appealing, at

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
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least much of it, but is it Mexican—authentic Mexican? Nothing on the website or menu explicitly quotes the owner saying as much.

By checking Yelp.com, the popular online review site, we can assess how individuals rate the two restaurants and what they say about their experiences. As of August 2016, Pancho Pistola had 368 reviews and an average cumulative consumer rating of 3.5 out of 5 stars. Reading the comments reveals 48 reviewers using the word “authentic.” However, closer examination shows that more than 60 percent of the comments claim the place is not very authentic—only 19 apparently judge it authentic. By contrast, Frontera Grill had received 1,751 reviews and an average cumulative rating of 4.0. Of these reviews, 120 mention “authentic,” and the overwhelming majority of these are positive, exclaiming the authenticity of the place or food.

This tale of these two restaurants illustrates the general questions animating this study: When evaluating an organization’s authenticity, how credible to individuals are direct and overt self-claims about its identity that are made in marketing and other messages? How do an organization’s obvious self-promotions regarding its identity as authentic affect the attributions of audiences? When trying to project an authentic identity, what should an organization do and not do in its messaging?

These questions matter because empirical research in sociology and other fields shows that in advanced economic markets, individuals place significant value on authenticity when evaluating products and services. Authenticity has been shown to carry value for individuals in a wide variety of domains, including art (Fine 2004), music (Peterson 1997; Grazian 2005; Lena 2012), wine (Beverland 2005a; 2009; Goode 2011), automobiles (Leigh, Peters, and Shelton 2006), tourist attractions (Grayson and Martinec 2004; Wang 1999), food and dining (Carroll and Wheaton 2009), celebrity memorabilia (Newman, Diesendruck, and Bloom 2011), fairs and holiday markets (Castéran and Roederer 2013), and even reality television (Rose and Wood 2005), among many others. Recent empirical studies demonstrate that individuals typically rate more highly those producers perceived to be authentic (Kovács, Carroll, and Lehman 2014), and they are also willing to pay more for authentic products (O’Connor, Carroll, and Kovács 2016). Various theories have been offered as to why consumers seek the authentic (e.g., Beverland and Farrelly 2009; Hahl, Zuckerman, and Kim 2016; Newman et al. 2011; Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006), but regardless of motivation, the consensus among social scientists seems to be clear: in modern, advanced economies, many individuals seek and value authenticity.

Less agreement exists, however, over how individuals respond to organizations portraying themselves explicitly as possessing an authentic identity. On the one hand, many sociologists and other analysts suggest that individuals tend to view such claims unfavorably (Elster 1981; Holt 2002; Kozinets 2002; Thompson and Tambyah 1999). They reason that negative perceptions arise because individuals are usually aware that these identity claims are inherently self-promotional or manipulative. This view can be discerned implicitly in the subtitle to Richard A. Peterson’s (1997) famous book on country music: *Fabricating Authenticity*. On the other hand, we also know from Peterson’s (1997) as well as Grazian’s (2005) work, among others, that audiences do often buy into and accept many of the details

of a self-projected identity of authenticity. As Gary Alan Fine (1995:541) claims, “many consumers desire [only] the ‘illusion of authenticity.’” Accordingly, perhaps, many organizations continuously and actively promote themselves as authentic, suggesting that the messaging effect might be beneficial. Or it could be that the managers of these organizations are uninformed and simply misunderstand the potential negative consequences of making these claims.

Taken together, it is clear that we do not yet understand the limits of credible self-projection, particularly when it comes to organizational identity claims regarding authenticity. How far and explicitly can an actor or an organization fabricate authenticity (or present an obvious illusion of it) and still maintain credibility? Does it extend to explicit self-proclamations of authenticity? Based on current sociological theory and evidence, it appears as though how individuals respond to self-proclamations of authenticity remains a bit of a theoretical as well as a practical puzzle.

We seek to make progress on this sociological research question. We do so by exploring a theoretical framework of how individuals develop perceptions and make valuations about organizations self-proclaiming their own authenticity. Our core thesis is that individuals will typically devalue organizations that make such claims, and we explore the cognitive and affective mechanisms that drive this devaluation; in doing so, we shed new light on how individuals respond to organizational identity claims about authenticity.

We test this argument using data from the restaurant domain. As Fine (1995:547) proclaims about contemporary society, “dining out is identity work.” It is thus no surprise that authenticity of the dining experience is of increasing importance in advanced economies. Prior research shows that individuals prefer authentic restaurants (Carroll and Wheaton 2009; Kovács et al. 2014), and so, as one might expect, many restaurants engage in varying degrees of attempting to produce, project, and market authenticity in their identity claims. In two separate empirical studies reported below, we investigate how individual audience members respond to such direct attempts at proclaiming authenticity through obvious promotional materials. The first study analyzes authenticity claims made in the texts of menus from 1,393 restaurants in Los Angeles and corresponding responses to those claims in 450,492 online reviews. The second study tests the effect of authenticity self-claims in experimental settings using fictional restaurant menus. To the best of our knowledge, an examination of audience responses to organizational self-proclamations of authenticity has not been tested yet with the kind of systematic empirical evidence that we offer here.

## Theory

### *Perceived Authenticity and Value Ratings*

We are concerned generally with how individual audience members perceive and value the products and services associated with their organizations. Consumer perceived value is defined as the “overall assessment of the utility of a product [or, brand, service, or experience] based on perceptions of what is received and

what is given" (Zeithaml 1988:14). These perceptions of value tend to drive individual choices (Sweeney and Soutar 2001) and are also frequently reflected in the ratings and comments individuals offer in public online forums such as review websites. These public ratings often impact others' purchasing decisions as well as the reputation and success of the producer (Anderson and Magruder 2012; Luca 2016).

Numerous studies suggest that one pathway by which an individual's evaluation of an organization is driven, at least in part, is his or her perception of its authenticity. For example, Fine (1995) described how diners in Athens, Georgia, found Chinese restaurants appealing based on the degree to which they were perceived as serving authentic Chinese dishes. Likewise, Newman and Dhar (2014) found that goods manufactured in a producer's original factory are perceived as more authentic and hence more valuable than those produced in other factories. Recently, Kovács et al. (2014) analyzed large samples of online reviews of restaurants and showed strong empirical associations between perceived authenticity and higher consumer value ratings, even after controlling for the quality of the restaurants. They concluded that organizations perceived as (and publicly referred to as) authentic by diners and others are more highly valued, all other things being equal. These findings agree with a host of qualitative studies from a variety of contexts as far reaching as wine (Beverland and Farrelly 2009), art (Fine 2004), music (Grazian 2005; Peterson 2005), Christmas concerts (Derbaix and Derbaix 2010), tourism (Wang 1999), and others. These studies consistently report that an individual's perceived authenticity of a product, service, or producer affects her motivation to engage with it, propensity to buy it, and level of enjoyment of it.

It is useful to distinguish analytically between two common forms of meaning implied by an authenticity attribution. In some cases, authenticity can be evaluated primarily in objective terms. For example, scientific methods and careful analysis can reveal whether a painting was indeed painted by Max Ernst or a forger. Originality in such cases is referred to as "nominal authenticity" (Dutton 2003) or "historical authenticity" (Newman and Smith 2016). Here, proof that an item is spatially or temporally connected (via signature, touch, ownership, or whatever) to a particular person or place deems it authentic in the eyes of the consumer (Frazier et al. 2009; Newman and Dhar 2014; Newman et al. 2011). By this view, an organization, product, or service is either authentic or it is not, and a clear determination can be made through careful analysis, even if difficult to do.

In many other cases of contemporary interest, however, authenticity can only be evaluated instead in subjective terms. For example, no scientific method or analysis can determine whether or not a French restaurant is indeed authentically French. For some, any restaurant serving French cuisine might be considered authentic; for others, a French chef might be required; for others, perhaps only a restaurant located in France could possibly be considered authentic. Facts and cues can point in different directions and different people can draw divergent conclusions about what is versus what is not authentic (Trilling 1972). In such cases, authenticity is socially constructed (Peterson 2005).

We focus here on socially constructed authenticity; that is, we are concerned with the subjective interpretation of facts rather than the objective determina-

tion of those facts. Individual audience members—in their particular cultural context—collectively negotiate these interpretations through social interactions and exchanges. As such, at any time, attributions of authenticity might vary from person to person. At the same time, with time and social interaction, consensus develops within a context and attributions take on a sort of cultural status, through which they guide behavior and affect cognition automatically. Socially constructed authenticity thus depends heavily on language and discourse among observers and audience members. Attributions of authenticity occur when someone verbalizes something that invokes the concept of authenticity, perhaps using the word “authentic” or any of a host of closely associated words. When an individual makes such attributions and uses such language to describe an organization and its products or services, he or she tends to assign higher value ratings to it (Kovács et al. 2014; Lehman, Kovács, and Carroll 2014).

### *Self-Proclamations of an Authentic Identity*

It is clear, then, that audience members tend to value authenticity and—at least in most cases in contemporary society—that authenticity is socially constructed through public discourse. Yet how do consumers respond to active organizational participation in the public discourse about the organization’s identity as authentic? In other words, how do individuals interpret and react to overt organizational self-proclamations of authenticity?

Consumer research has grappled with more general versions of this question for many years, dating back at least to Friestad and Wright’s (1994) persuasion knowledge model. Their analysis starts with the assumption that consumers are not naïve and that “coping with marketers’ influence attempts is a central part of being a consumer. After all, the marketer is a known persuasion agent” (p. 26). The model posits that an individual’s response to any self-proclamation is complex and depends on her “persuasion knowledge” or readings and interpretations of the context, especially the individuals and the organization sending the message. According to this model, then, an individual is more easily influenced by organizational self-claims to the extent that she has less knowledge about the situation. Yet, other work has suggested that such knowledge may be less relevant because individuals are generally skeptical of promotional claims altogether (Ford, Smith, and Swasy 1990; Vonk 1999; Tal-Or 2010) and that this skepticism is learned through a socialization process during adolescence (Boush, Friestad, and Rose 1994; Mangleburg and Bristol 1998). In short, the preponderance of evidence from the consumer research literature suggests that individuals do not generally take organizational claims at face value but that the willingness to do so may vary depending on an individual’s knowledge of the situation at hand.

How individuals interpret self-claims of organizational identity that specifically relate to authenticity remains more of an open question, largely because of a lack of systematic examination. An observation from Elster (1981) offers an insightful starting point to better understand this puzzle: “The terms of sincerity and authenticity, like those of wisdom and dignity, always have a faintly ridiculous air about them when employed in the first person singular, reflecting the fact that the correspond-



ing states are essentially by-products" (p. 440). With the term "by-product," Elster means a social state that occurs only because of actions pursued for other reasons: "it can never be brought about intelligently or intentionally because the attempt to do so precludes the very state one is trying to bring about" (p. 413). By this view, explicitly claiming authenticity as an identity for one's self shows that the claimant does not understand the nature of the phenomenon. Moreover, it implies that the claimant is claiming something that is inherently contradictory. As with wisdom or humility, authenticity may be an attribute that one cannot appropriately claim for oneself because doing so shows a lack of understanding about the very nature of the attribute, or at least the normative order supporting it. The inherently contradictory nature of the claim may be what makes a self-proclamation of authenticity counternormative in the eyes of many.

Consequently, by this view, a self-proclamation of authenticity can be expected to have the opposite of the intended effect. That is, such claims will result in lower perceptions of authenticity. Consumer researchers have made similar assertions. For example, Holt (2002) argues: "Postmodern consumer culture has adopted a particular notion of authenticity that has proved particularly challenging to marketers. To be authentic, brands must be disinterested" (p. 83). Indeed, various studies have shown that commercialization itself can lower perceptions of authenticity (e.g., Kozinets 2002; Thompson and Tambyah 1999). More recently, Beverland (2009) goes so far as to argue that, "like quality, authenticity must be shown, not stated;" as such, "[self-] claims may render genuinely authentic brands fake. . ." (p. 178) Thus, for an attribution such as authenticity, for which motives are core to the interpretation, individuals might even view overt self-promotional efforts as evidence of inauthenticity (Beverland and Farrelly 2009; Brown Kozinets, and Sherry 2003). If so, then individuals would likely judge negatively an organization engaged in self-promotion of its identity as authentic.

On the other hand, other research suggests that under certain conditions, individuals might judge self-claims about authenticity favorably. For example, when viewed as information dispersion, authenticity claims can serve to make individuals more aware of particular attributes that connote authenticity, thereby resulting in positive judgments (Beverland 2005b). Moreover, even if the claims are perceived as self-promotional, and perhaps even if they are known to be stylized versions of the truth, they can convey a narrative, which individuals might appreciate and thereby value (Peterson 1997; Beverland 2009; Busselle and Bilandzic 2008; Johnson, Thomson, and Jeffrey 2015). Or, some audience members may simply lack the knowledge to be able to determine the validity of such claims (Friestad and Wright 1994). If so, then it is less clear how individuals would likely judge an organization engaged in self-promotion of its identity as authentic.

Pressing Elster's logic further, however, allows us to consider another aspect of the reaction to a self-claim of authenticity. If audiences indeed regard such claims as counternormative, then we would expect that reactions to it might arouse an emotional response as well. The role of emotions in consumer decision making is well documented (e.g., Han, Lerner, and Keltener 2007; Laros and Steenkamp 2004; Richins, 1997; Shiv and Fedorikhin 1999; Yeung and Wyer 2004). Emotions are especially important when a product or brand is integrated into a consumer's

life or shapes his or her own identity (Thompson et al. 2006). As such, emotions may be particularly relevant in understanding consumers' quest for authenticity as well as their reactions to organizational claims of it. Consider also that a primary interpretation of authenticity involves the perceived moral basis of an agent's goals and motivation, whereby authentic actors are seen as transcending profit-oriented goals and the narrow pursuit of self-interest. Accordingly, behavior that may be regarded as self-promotion or unduly self-interested is often seen as inauthentic (Hahl et al. 2016). Instead, an authentic actor or producer is seen as someone who pursues their own thoughtfully considered agenda rather than the usual normatively accepted social script. An authentic organization is one whose founders or managing executives guide it to pursue similarly moral-based behaviors. As Baron (2004) puts it: "the most authentic identities . . . invoke a non-economic logic of action, inasmuch as they require actors do certain things that cut against their narrow self-interest" (p. 14)

Organizational self-proclamations of an authentic identity can thus be expected to elicit a strong visceral reaction from audience members. It is in response to such claims of authenticity that individuals, acting in a postmodern culture of consumer resistance (Firat and Vekatesh 1995; Murray and Ozanne 1991), will not only be skeptical of branding and promotional attempts but also defiant against them (Holt 2002). Indeed, audience members may be inclined to perceive organizational self-claims of authenticity as evidence of the opposite and judge the organization accordingly, especially if the individual has the knowledge to make such evaluations of the authenticity claim. Regardless of the cognitive response, however, we expect a strong emotional response. In other words, we anticipate that the reaction to such claims may be so ingrained culturally that many audience members do not even cognitively process it but, instead, automatically processes it in the marketplace as negative. For either reason, we expect that organizations making such claims will receive lower value judgments by audience members. Taken together, we propose the following.

Hypothesis: Consumers assign lower value to organizations making self-proclamations about authenticity.

## Empirical Analysis

To test the hypothesized effects and proposed mechanisms, we conducted two studies. The first study explores the proposed framework by analyzing authenticity claims made in the texts of menus from restaurants in Los Angeles and corresponding responses to those claims in online reviews. The second study tests the core hypothesis using fictitious restaurant menus. We present each in turn.



## Study 1: Archival Analysis of Menus and Reviews

### *Study Context and Data*

This first study tests the proposed hypothesis using archival data from the restaurant domain. Restaurants present an apt setting for studying the consequences of authenticity claims for several reasons. First, although many diverse restaurants populate the restaurant domain, the organizations are similar enough in function and form to be compared meaningfully; namely, they have readily comparable product structures (e.g., menus, see Kovács and Johnson 2014), and similar notions of authenticity apply to them. Second, analyzing the restaurant domain allows us to build on previous research in the food and beverage domains (Jurafsky 2015; Rao, Monin, and Durand 2003). Third, detailed and comprehensive records are available on broad sets of restaurants, their menus, and consumer evaluations. Data came from two sources: Yelp.com and MenuPages.com; both pertain to restaurants and their diners in Los Angeles County, California (United States). We discuss each in turn.

Yelp.com was founded in 2004 and generates online reviews of restaurants and other establishments through a voluntary process in which any individual can go online to write a review. The advantage of this particular website as a data source is that it encompasses a broader audience than many food and gourmet magazines and media outlets (e.g., Zagat; cf. Johnston and Baumann 2007). Each review contains four pieces of information: (1) a unique identifier of the reviewer; (2) a star rating of the restaurant, ranging from one to five as an integer number; (3) a text review written by the reviewer; and (4) the date of the review. We downloaded all reviews of restaurants operating in Los Angeles County that were posted from November 1, 2009, through April 1, 2016; the final sample contained 450,492 reviews.

MenuPages.com is a Grubhub brand that was also founded in 2004 and posts restaurant menus online for patrons to view. The menus are sent by the restaurant staff to the management of the website (either by mail, fax, or by electronic upload), where the menus are checked and standardized in terms of formatting. All font styles, pictures, colors, and other stylistic items are removed; what appears on the website are the names of the items offered in the restaurant, their descriptions, and the prices. Figure 1 illustrates this standard format, showing a snippet of the menu of Mayra's Authentic Cuban & Carribean (*sic*), a Cuban restaurant in Los Angeles. We downloaded all menus of restaurants operating in Los Angeles County that were available on November 1st of 2011, 2013, and 2015. The menus vary greatly in length. The shortest menu (from Best Fish Taco in Ensenada) only lists three items, while the longest menu (from Coral Café) offers 824 items; the average number of menu items is 119.5. The website also allows restaurant owners to categorize their restaurant into one or more standard cuisine categories; they can choose from 91 labels. Most restaurants are in one category (54 percent), others are in two categories (34 percent), and some are in three or more categories (12 percent); the most popular categories are "Mexican," "Chinese," "Italian," "Pizza," "American (New)," and "Japanese."

Each review from Yelp.com was matched with the most recent menu from MenuPages.com. (For reviews that precede November 1st, 2011, we matched the

**Mayra's Authentic Cuban & Carribean**  
 14438 Victory Blvd  
 Van Nuys, CA 91401  
 At Van Nuys Blvd

**818 799-9241**

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### Aperitivos

Cuban Tamale *tender cuban tamale stuffed with pork*..... 3.00  
 Croquetas *two ham croquettes*..... 3.00  
 Papa Rellena *two mashed potato balls stuffed with cuban style ground beef "picadillo"*..... 3.00  
 Yucca Con Mojo *yucca root with garlic mojo sauce*..... 3.00  
 Fufu De Platano *green banana mixed with chicharone with mojo sauce on top*..... 7.00  
 Plantano Frito *five pieces of fried plantains*..... 3.00  
 Plato Surtido *four papa rellena, four croquetes de jamon and three empanadas*..... 15.00

### Sopas

*Cup / Bowl*

Sopa Del Dia *soup of the day*..... 4.00 6.00  
 Sopa De Frijoles Negros *black bean soup*..... 4.00 5.00

### Carne De Res

Bistec Empanizado *lightly breaded prime top sirloin. served with your choice of white rice, black beans, plantano frito or tostones*..... 12.00  
 Bistec Palomia *prime top sirloin steak cooked with caramelized onions. served with your choice of white rice, black beans, plantano frito or tostones*..... 16.00  
 Ropa Vieja *shredded beef marinate in a light tomato sauce with peppers and onions. served with your choice of white rice, black beans, plantano frito or tostones*..... 13.00

### Carne De Puerco

Lechon Asado *oven roasted pork leg served with caramelized onion. served with your choice of white rice, black beans, plantanos frito or fries*..... 14.00  
 Chuleta De Puerco *two pork chops grilled with caramelized onions. served with your choice of white rice, black beans, plantanos frito or fries*..... 13.00  
 Bistec De Puerco *two boneless pork steaks with caramelized onions. served with your choice of white rice, black beans, plantanos frito or fries*..... 12.00

### Pollo

Pechuga A La Plancha *grilled chicken breast marinated in cuban herbs and garnished with caramelized onions. served with your choice of white rice, black beans, plantanos frito or fries*..... 12.00  
 Pechuga Empanizada *lightly breaded chicken breast. served with your choice of white rice, black beans, plantanos frito or fries*..... 12.00  
 Fricase De Pollo *chicken and potatoes simmered in a tomato sauce with olives, white wine and cuban spices. served with your choice of white rice, black beans, plantanos frito or fries*..... 14.00

### Marisco

Filete De Halibut Al Ajillio *fresh halibut steak sauteed in garlic, white wine, and olive oil. served with your choice of white rice, black beans, salad or yucca con mojo*..... 18.00  
 Camarones Al Ajillio *mouth-watering shrimp sauteed in garlic, white wine, and olive oil. served with your choice of white rice, black beans, salad or yucca con mojo*..... 16.00

Bacalao Con Papa *cod fish stewed in a light tomato sauce with potatoes. served with your choice of white rice, black beans, salad or yucca con mojo*..... 13.00  
 Paella For Two *yellow rice mixed with seafood. served with your choice of white rice, black beans, salad or yucca con mojo. please allow 30 minutes to prepare*..... 50.00

### Sandwiches

Sandwich Cubano *ham, roasted pork, swiss cheese, mayonnaise, mustard and pickles served on cuban bread*..... 10.00  
 Pan Con Lechon *hand carved oven roasted pork leg with caramelized onions on cuban bread*..... 8.00  
 Ropa Vieja Sandwich *shredded beef with bell pepper and caramelized onion in tomato sauce on cuban toast*..... 10.00  
 Sandwich De Jamon Y Queso *ham and cheese sandwich*..... 8.00

### Day Special

*Lunch Only*

Pollo Asado *leg quarter chicken in white garlic sauce. served with white rice, black beans, plantanos frito or fries*..... 9.00  
 Arroz Con Pollo *a cuban classic. chicken, yellow rice, and a slowly slice avocado served with lemon. served with white rice, black beans, plantanos frito or fries*..... 11.00  
 Carne Con Papa *cuban style beef cubes cooked with spanish olives and vegetables. served with white rice, black beans, plantanos frito or fries*..... 10.00  
 Picadillo *cuban style ground beef cooked with cuban style beef cubes, spanish olives, and vegetables. served with white rice, black beans, plantanos frito or fries*..... 9.00  
 Fricase De Pollo *chicken and potatoes simmer in a tomato sauce with olives, white wine, and cuban spices. served with white rice, black beans, plantanos frito or fries*..... 11.00  
 Ensalada De Aguacate *sliced avocado served with lemon. served with white rice, black beans, plantanos frito or fries*..... 8.00  
 Rabo Encendido *spicy oxtail. served with white rice, black beans, plantanos frito or fries*..... 13.00  
 Bacalao Con Papa *served with white rice, black beans, plantanos frito or fries*..... 14.00

### Kid's Menu


Hot Dog..... 2.00  
 Hamburger..... 3.00  
 Chicken Soup..... 3.00  
 French Fries..... 2.00

### Postres

Flan..... 4.00  
 Arroz Con Leche..... 4.50  
 Pudding..... 3.50

### Beverages

Milk..... 2.00  
 Traditional Cuban Soft Drink *choose a soft drink: materva, jupina, malta, inca cola, iron beer*..... 3.00  
 Fountain Drink *choose a fountain drink: coke, diet coke, sprite, fanta, dr. pepper*..... 2.00  
 Fruit Shake *choose a flavor: papaya, mango, guanabana*..... 4.00



Menu Items and Prices subject to change. Information related to this restaurant is provided solely for informational purposes only and is not an endorsement or guarantee by MenuPages.com or any Listed Restaurant.  
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Figure 1: Snippet from the menu of Mayra's Authentic Cuban &amp; Carribean (sic).

menu that we obtained for November 1st, 2011.) This panel structure of the data allows us to make strong inferences about the effect of organizational self-claims on consumers' perceptions and ratings.

### *Variables*

**Value rating.** The primary outcome variable of interest is the overall rating provided by the reviewer on Yelp.com; it is the number of stars (out of five) assigned to the restaurant in the focal review. The average rating is 3.7; the mode is 4.

**Authenticity.** An authenticity score was constructed to measure organizational self-claims as well as individual audience member perceptions; both were constructed using content analysis (Weber 1990). For organizational self-claims of authenticity, we analyzed the text of the menus written and published by the restaurant operators to MenuPages.com; the text included all food and nonfood items on the menu, as beverages and other nonfood items may also involve authenticity claims. This measure served as the key independent variable. For audience perceptions of authenticity, we analyzed the text of the free commentary entered by each reviewer on Yelp.com. This measure served as a key control and mediator variable.

The content analyses involved searching for authenticity- and inauthenticity-related keywords in the texts. We relied on the authenticity keyword list of Kovács et al. (2014), who conducted experiments using the "All Our Ideas" website (Salganik and Levy 2012) to compile a list of 92 keywords. Each keyword was assigned a score ranging from 0 (highly inauthentic) to 100 (highly authentic) based on consumer responses. Keywords preceded by "no" or "not" were reverse-coded. Following Kovács et al. (2014), the authenticity keyword values were rescaled to a -1 (inauthentic) to +1 (authentic) scale, such that 0 represents authenticity-neutral words. For each word that was not listed as an authenticity-related keyword, a neutral value of 0 was assigned. To minimize possible coding biases, the content analysis was done by a computer program that analyzed the text and counted the occurrences of the keywords in each set of text. An authenticity score was then assigned to each menu (self-claim) and review (audience perception) based on the sum of the authenticity keyword scores in the respective texts.

**Emotion or affect.** Individuals' emotional responses to organizational self-claims of authentic identity were measured by analyzing the open response text of each review on Yelp.com for emotion-laden words. To capture such words, we relied on the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count ("LIWC"; Pennebaker, Booth, and Francis 2007; see also Pennebaker, Mehl, and Niederhoffer 2003). The LIWC labels 407 words as invoking "positive emotion" and 499 words as invoking "negative emotion." We used a simple count of these words as a key dependent and mediator variable. To take into account the varying length of reviews, we control for the count of words in each review.

**Control variables.** Several reviewer- and review-specific control variables were also included: (1) *total words in the review*, (2) *reviewer activism* based on the number

of reviews written by the same reviewer prior to the focal review (prior studies have shown that activist reviewers tend to give lower ratings [Kovács and Hannan 2010]), (3) *reviewer variety-seeking* based on the log of the number of establishments visited by the reviewer, (4) date of the review was accounted for with the inclusion of year fixed effects, and (5) reviewer ID to control for other nonobservable, reviewer-specific differences.

Several menu- and restaurant-specific control variables were included as well:

1. total words in the menu
2. number of cuisine categories to which the restaurant belonged; dummy variables for the specific categories were also included
3. restaurant age based on the date of the first review of that restaurant posted to Yelp.com as a proxy (in years)
4. restaurant popularity based on the log of the number of reviews it has received prior to the focal review
5. restaurant price based on “the approximate cost per person for a meal, including one drink, tax and tips” (Yelp.com). A “\$” restaurant denotes “cheap, under \$10,” “\$\$” denotes “moderate, \$11–\$30,” “\$\$\$” denotes “spendy, \$30–\$61,” and “\$\$\$\$” denotes “splurge, above \$61.” In our sample, 32 percent of the restaurants are in the lowest price range, 49 percent are in the “\$\$” range, 15 percent are in the “\$\$\$” range, and the remaining 4 percent are in the “\$\$\$\$” category
6. chain-affiliation measured as a dichotomous variable (i.e., 0 = no chain affiliation; 1 = chain affiliation) based on whether or not other restaurants with the same name were in operation; about 12 percent of the restaurants in the sample were affiliated with a chain
7. family ownership measured as a dichotomous variable (i.e., 0 = not family owned; 1 = family owned) based on the inclusion of whether or not “family-owned” or “family-operated” appeared in the text of the reviews
8. geographic location was accounted for with the inclusion of zip code fixed effects

We also control for restaurant quality self-claims. This was measured with a similar content analysis strategy, examining the text of the menus. We parsed out quality-related words to develop counts of these words. We again relied on the keyword list of Kovács et al. (2014), which was developed through a compilation of synonyms for high quality. For example, the mention of words such as “excellent,” “great,” “supreme,” and “first-rate” were treated as positive quality words.

## Findings

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and pairwise correlations for the main variables. It is worthwhile to note that, as expected, an individual’s perception of a

**Table 1:** Descriptive statistics and correlations (study 1).

Variable	Mean	S.D.	Min	Max	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
(1) Menu Authenticity															
Self-Claims	1.66	2.51	-10.4	22.36											
(2) Perceived Authenticity	0.14	0.35	-4.92	6.04	0.00										
(3) Menu															
Total Words	1,170.87	1,020.57	2	9,668	0.65	-0.02									
(4) Review															
Total Words	113.35	106.97	1	1,006	-0.02	0.24	0.00								
(5) Reviewer Activism	0.95	1.09	0	5.18	-0.01	0.05	-0.01	0.19							
(6) Reviewer Variety-Seeking	0.61	0.6	0	2.6	-0.01	0.04	-0.01	0.13	0.75						
(7) Restaurant Popularity	5.6	1.16	0.69	8.77	-0.01	0.00	0.03	0.00	-0.04	-0.03					
(8) Restaurant Price	2.00	0.71	1	4	-0.05	0.03	0.06	0.14	0.02	0.02	0.22				
(9) Menu Quality															
Claims: Positive	6.91	11.36	0	154	0.42	-0.02	0.64	-0.02	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.03			
(10) Menu Quality															
Claims: Negative	0.13	0.57	0	12	0.24	0.01	0.15	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.06	0.00	0.04		
(11) No. Cuisine															
Categories	1.67	0.73	1	4	0.13	-0.02	0.10	0.10	0.01	0.02	0.12	0.06	0.07	0.02	
(12) Star Rating	3.73	1.26	1	5	-0.04	0.11	-0.06	-0.05	-0.04	-0.02	0.07	0.03	-0.05	0.00	-0.01

N = 450,492.



restaurant's authenticity as well as her rating of it are negatively correlated to the restaurant's claims of its own authenticity.

Table 2 shows linear regression results on value ratings. (These same models have also been estimated using an ordered logit framework, and the conclusions from those estimates do not differ appreciably from those reported here.) Model 1 shows the baseline model with the control variables. Also, as might be expected, longer reviews ( $-0.002, p < 0.01$ ), reviewer activism ( $-0.018, p < 0.01$ ), multiple cuisine categories ( $-0.028, p < 0.01$ ), and chain affiliation ( $-0.017, p < 0.01$ ) all tend to be associated with lower ratings. Alternatively, reviewer variety-seeking ( $0.017, p < 0.01$ ), restaurant popularity ( $0.088, p < 0.01$ ), family ownership ( $0.400, p < 0.05$ ), and price ( $0.049, p < 0.01$ ) all tend to be associated with higher ratings. Model 2 includes organizational self-proclaimed authenticity and serves as a test of the core hypothesis; the coefficient is negative and statistically significant ( $-0.002, p < 0.01$ ), lending support to the hypothesis.

Table 3 shows linear regression estimates on emotion-laden words; these models explore evidence for an affective mechanism. Model 1 estimates the count of positive-emotion words in the focal review, while model 2 estimates the count of negative-emotion words in the focal review. In general, authenticity self-claims result in fewer positive-emotion words (model 1:  $-0.028, p < 0.01$ ) and more negative-emotion words (model 2:  $0.004, p < 0.01$ ).

Figure 2 shows estimates of a structural equation model (SEM) designed to explore whether individual perceptions of authenticity and emotion-laden responses might possibly mediate the effect of authenticity self-claims on individual value ratings. The model shows a reasonable fit ( $SRMR = 0.095$ ;  $CFI = 0.712$ ;  $\chi^2 = 59,145.597, p < 0.001$ ). Of course, it is neither surprising nor problematic that the chi-square test is significant given the large sample size; more importantly, the SRMR, which is "more sensitive to model misspecification than to sample size or violations of distributional assumptions" and thus the "preferred" fit index (Iacobucci 2010:96), suggests a reasonable fit. The estimates show that authenticity self-claims about organizational identity correspond to fewer positive-emotion words ( $-0.043, p < 0.01$ ) and more negative-emotion words ( $0.002, p < 0.10$ ) in the text of the reviews. The positive-emotion words lead to higher ratings ( $0.066, p < 0.01$ ) and negative-emotion words to lower ratings ( $-0.327, p < 0.01$ ). Moreover, the positive-emotion words also lead to higher perceived authenticity ( $0.022, p < 0.01$ ), whereas negative-emotion words lead to lower perceived authenticity ( $-0.009, p < 0.01$ ). The emotion-laden words thus partially mediate the overall negative effect of authenticity self-claims; the extent of the partial mediation is 20 percent ( $p < 0.05$ ). Interestingly, self-claims did lead to higher perceived authenticity; however, the effect size was small albeit significant ( $0.001, p < 0.01$ ), and self-claims also had a direct effect on ratings ( $-0.017, p < 0.01$ ). In sum, the overall effect of self-claims on ratings is negative.

### *Additional Analysis*

In a set of additional analyses, we also investigated the conditions underlying self-proclaimed authenticity. Table 4 shows linear regression models at the review

**Table 2:** OLS estimates of value ratings (study 1).

	Model 1	Model 2
Menu Authenticity Self-Claims		−0.002* (0.001)
Perceived Authenticity	0.542 <sup>†</sup> (0.005)	0.542 <sup>†</sup> (0.005)
Menu Total Words (in thousands)	−0.048 <sup>†</sup> (0.003)	−0.048 <sup>†</sup> (0.003)
Review Total Words (in thousands)	−2.268 <sup>†</sup> (0.018)	−2.268 <sup>†</sup> (0.018)
Reviewer Activism	−0.018 <sup>†</sup> (0.003)	−0.018 <sup>†</sup> (0.003)
Reviewer Variety-Seeking	0.017 <sup>†</sup> (0.005)	0.017 <sup>†</sup> (0.005)
Restaurant Popularity	0.088 <sup>†</sup> (0.003)	0.088 <sup>†</sup> (0.003)
Restaurant Price	0.049 <sup>†</sup> (0.004)	0.049 <sup>†</sup> (0.004)
No. Cuisine Categories	−0.028 <sup>†</sup> (0.003)	−0.027 <sup>†</sup> (0.003)
Family-Owned	0.400* (0.188)	0.400* (0.188)
Chain-Affiliated	−0.017 <sup>†</sup> (0.006)	−0.016* (0.006)
Restaurant Age	−0.006 <sup>†</sup> (0.002)	−0.006 <sup>†</sup> (0.002)
Menu Quality Claims: Positive (in thousands)	−0.671* (0.320)	−0.698* (0.320)
Menu Quality Claims: Negative (in thousands)	133.104 <sup>†</sup> (23.676)	131.024 <sup>†</sup> (23.696)
Year Fixed Effects (FE)	Yes	Yes
Zip Code FE	Yes	Yes
Cuisine FE	Yes	Yes
R-squared	0.083	0.084

N = 450,492

† $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$ , standard errors in parentheses

level, in which the dependent variable is the self-proclaimed authenticity score we calculated from the focal review. Model 2 differs from model 1 in that it includes fixed effects for cuisine categories. Findings are consistent across both models. The one strong effect observed is a positive and significant effect of chain affiliation. By these estimates, chains restaurants are more likely to make self-proclamations about authenticity.



**Table 3:** OLS estimates of LIWC word scales using texts of online reviews (study 1).

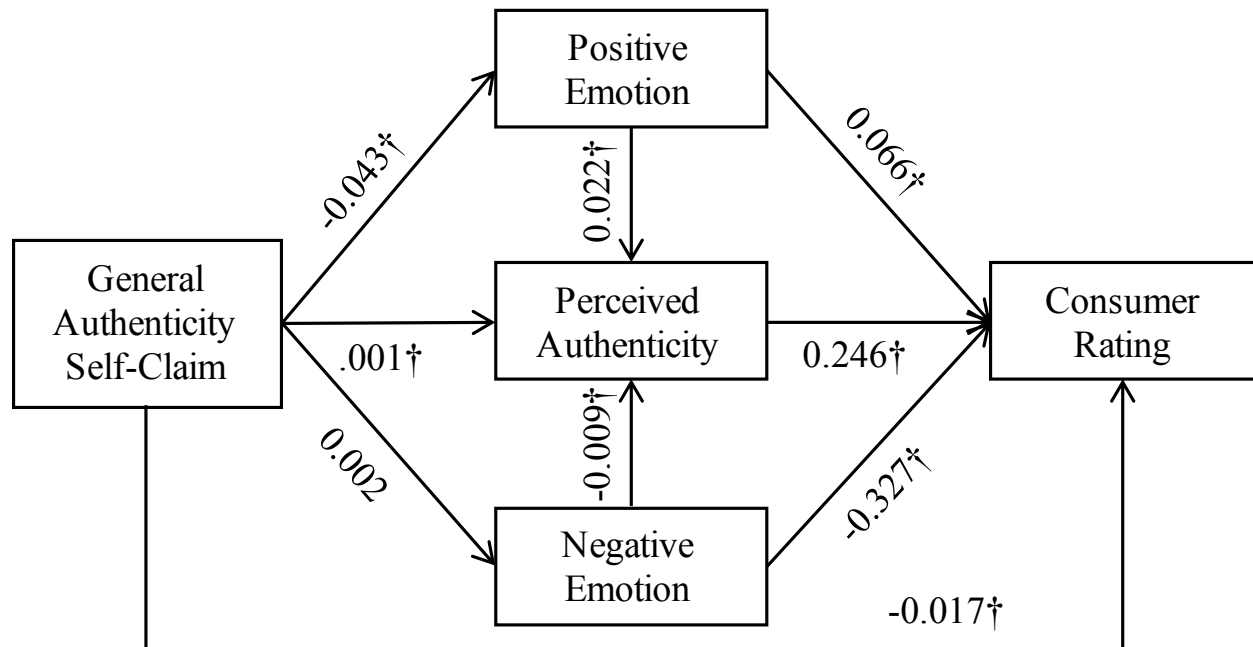
	Positive Emotion word count (1)	Negative Emotion word count (2)
Menu Authenticity Self-Claims	−0.028 <sup>†</sup> (0.003)	0.004 <sup>†</sup> (0.001)
Perceived Authenticity	1.451 <sup>†</sup> (0.013)	−0.464 <sup>†</sup> (0.006)
Menu Total Words (in thousands)	0.077 <sup>†</sup> (0.008)	0.005 (0.004)
Review Total Words (in thousands)	33.570 <sup>†</sup> (0.043)	11.007 <sup>†</sup> (0.021)
Reviewer Activism	0.099 <sup>†</sup> (0.006)	−0.082 <sup>†</sup> (0.003)
Reviewer Variety-Seeking	0.021 (0.011)	0.013 <sup>†</sup> (0.005)
Restaurant Popularity	0.090 <sup>†</sup> (0.006)	−0.017 <sup>†</sup> (0.003)
Restaurant Price	0.337 <sup>†</sup> (0.009)	−0.074 <sup>†</sup> (0.004)
No. Cuisine Categories	−0.003 (0.008)	−0.001 (0.004)
Family-Owned	0.851 (0.447)	−0.336 (0.215)
Chain-Affiliated	−0.006 (0.015)	0.014 (0.007)
Restaurant Age	−0.052 <sup>†</sup> (0.004)	0.000 (0.002)
Menu Quality Claims: Positive (in thousands)	−2.700 <sup>†</sup> (0.762)	1.646 <sup>†</sup> (0.368)
Menu Quality Claims: Negative (in thousands)	26.326 (56.466)	8.599 (27.241)
Constant	0.585 <sup>†</sup> (0.041)	0.091 <sup>†</sup> (0.020)
Year FE	Yes	Yes
Zip code FE	Yes	Yes
Cuisine FE	Yes	Yes
R-squared	0.650	0.400

N = 450,492

† $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$ , standard errors in parentheses

### *Discussion of Study 1*

Study 1 establishes support for the hypothesis, including associated mechanisms involving emotional arousal. Restaurants making general identity claims about



**Figure 2:** Structural equation model of value ratings (study 1).  $N = 450,492$ . † $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$

their own authenticity in the texts of their menus tend to receive lower online ratings. In addition, these effects are apparently mediated by the focal consumer's perceptions of authenticity and emotional responses to the claim.

Three advantages and related limitations of the study are worth noting. First, we only capture reviewer data from individuals who presumably dined at the restaurant. By design, this eliminates most individuals who had an a priori negative perception of the place and did not go. Some of these people possibly know of the organization's authenticity self-claims and decided not go on that basis. If so, then we have underestimated effects. Of course, the limitation is that we do not capture these responses, so we are not able to make such claims definitively. Second, the panel structure of the data allows us to make inferences that are stronger than mere correlational evidence. Despite this strength, archival data are limited in their ability to demonstrate causality: it is not possible to control for all possible extraneous factors. Third, the text analysis of both the menus and reviews allows us to rely more heavily on the explicit representational claims made about authenticity and less on an analytical filter. That is, we took expressed claims and attributions about authenticity at face value. Of course, the limitation here is that language is more complex than the computer programs employed to analyze it; as such, some words might be interpreted one way in our analysis even though they were intended to convey a different meaning altogether, perhaps even an opposite one that is not captured appropriately due, for example, to sarcasm. The steps taken in the analysis and the large sample overcome these limitations to a certain extent. However, to better overcome these limitations of the observational data and in order to establish a stronger case of internal validity, we conducted an experiment.

**Table 4:** OLS estimates of menu authenticity self-claims.

	(1)	(2)
Menu Total Words	1.855 <sup>†</sup> (0.063)	1.930 <sup>†</sup> (0.078)
Price	−0.123 (0.076)	0.051 (0.097)
Yelp Average Stars	−0.163 (0.095)	−0.168 (0.105)
Restaurant Popularity	−0.027 (0.049)	0.004 (0.056)
Family	1.177 (5.237)	1.024 (5.293)
Chain	0.640 <sup>†</sup> (0.144)	0.702 <sup>†</sup> (0.158)
No. Cuisine Categories	0.014 (0.070)	−1.303 (1.084)
Restaurant Age	0.078 (0.042)	0.054 (0.048)
Constant	0.458 (0.369)	8.555 (4.785)
Cuisine FE	No	Yes
R-squared	0.413	0.516

N = 1,393

<sup>†</sup> $p < 0.01$ ,  $*p < 0.05$ ; standard errors in parentheses

## Study 2: Experiment about Authenticity Self-Claims

### *Study Design*

The aim of this second study was to test the hypothesis in a simple yet highly controlled experimental setting. To do so, we designed a minimalistic restaurant profile for an Italian restaurant with two conditions: authenticity self-claim (“We are truly an authentic restaurant!”) and no self-claim (“We prepare the same dishes every day for your family!”). See Figure 3 for photos of each of the profiles. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions. They were asked to study the restaurant profile and then answer a set of questions about it, themselves, and their dining habits. Participants were recruited via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk; 300 participants participated, of which 287 (95.6 percent) passed the attention check (a free text response to the following question: “What kind of cuisine does the restaurant serve?”) and were thus included in the analysis.

The outcome of interest was perceived value. We used an ad hoc three-item scale for this purpose, which was composed of the following questions: (1) “Would you enjoy going to this restaurant?” (2) “What do you think the food at this restaurant



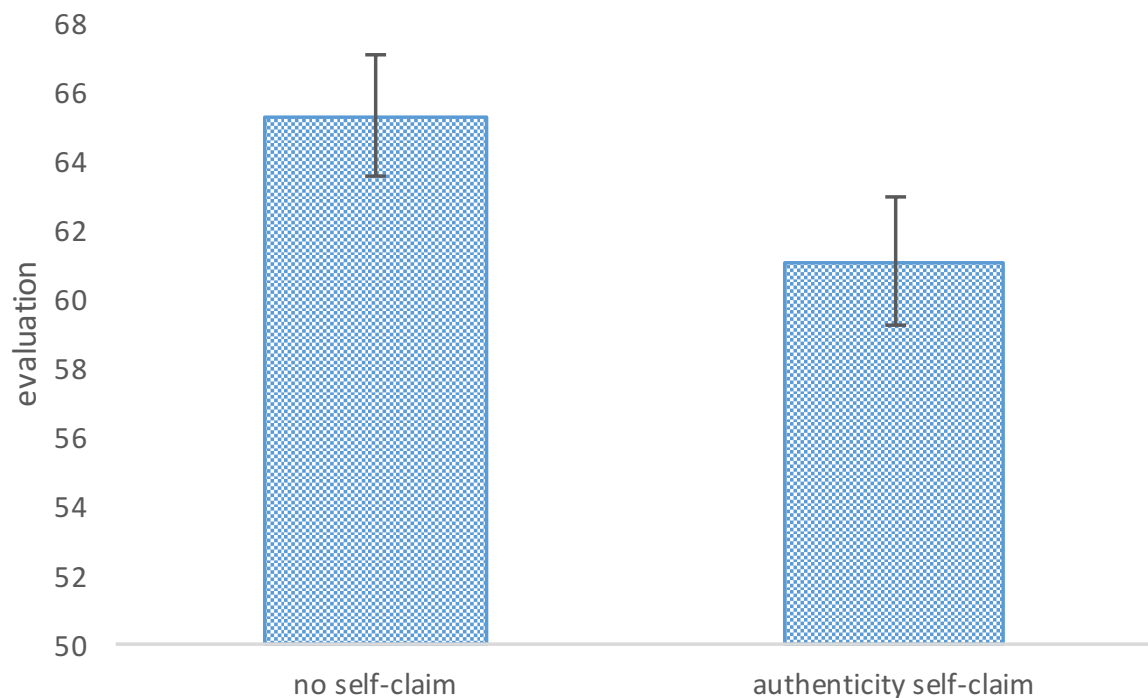
Figure 3: Restaurant profiles from experiment (study 2).

will be like?" and (3) "How likely it is that you would dine at this restaurant?" All three questions were presented on a separate screen and participants answered them using a 0–100 sliding scale, in which 100 denotes "very likely" for questions 1 and 3 and "wonderful" for question 2. The answers to these three questions were averaged for a perceived value score ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ).

### Findings

Figure 4 shows the results of the experiment. As proposed, the self-claims condition resulted in lower ratings compared to the no self-claims condition (61.05 vs. 65.27 respectively;  $t$ -test  $p < 0.05$ ).

In additional analyses, we disaggregated the perceived value score to the three questions we asked, and we analyzed separately the effect of the experimental manipulation on each. While the answers in the self-claims condition are in the expected direction for each separate question, the strongest is the effect on question 2 ("What do you think the food at this restaurant will be like?"; 65.98 vs. 61.77 in the self-claim vs no self-claim conditions;  $t$ -test  $p < 0.05$ ), and the effect is only marginally significant for question 1 ("Would you enjoy going to this restaurant?"; 64.57 vs 60.33;  $p = 0.07$ ) and not significant for question 3 ("How likely it is that you would dine at this restaurant?"; 61.87 vs 58.20;  $p = 0.13$ ). These patterns seem to indicate that self-claims have a weak influence on how people would choose and a stronger influence on how people would evaluate the organization with self-claims. Given that these three questions refer to related concepts, however, we believe that more future research is warranted to separate the choice versus evaluation effects of authenticity self-claims.



**Figure 4:** Mean responses to no self-claims versus authenticity self-claims (study 2).  $N = 287$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

### *Discussion of Study 2*

This simple two-condition experiment provides strong evidence that authenticity self-claims result in lower perceived value, lending further support for the proposed hypothesis. It controls for the many unobservable extraneous factors that might affect outcomes in archival data.

## General Discussion

The two studies presented here provide strong support for the proposed hypothesis that organizational self-proclamations of an authentic identity will lead to lower perceived value. That is, audience members often assign lower value ratings to organizations that tout themselves as authentic. Across two studies, diners rated restaurants following actual dining experiences (study 1) and hypothetical prospective dining experiences (study 2) lower when the restaurant proclaimed its own authenticity on its menu. Moreover, OLS and SEM estimates suggest that this reaction to self-claims involves an emotional response. Taken together, the two studies strongly support the proposed hypothesis about the negative effects of organizational self-claims about authenticity. Exactly how this occurs might be a bit debatable. To wit, the findings are consistent with either a scenario in which diners eat in a restaurant, notice the menu proclamations, and then devalue their experience, or an alternative scenario in which diners might know the restaurant

makes these claims and avoid it for that reason. The latter scenario seems more readily accountable for the experiment than the online review database, where we believe most commenters have actually visited the place.

The pattern of findings reviewed here represents an important contribution to research on authenticity and organizational identity. Most notably, we know now more about the unsettled theoretical question of how individuals respond to organizations that tout themselves as authentic. This is a particularly interesting question given that so many organizational leaders frequently make decisions about market messaging regarding authenticity, and many marketing gurus frequently offer apparently unfounded advice on how to do so. In terms of individual acceptance and endorsement regarding a product or service, the findings presented here suggest authenticity self-claims are tricky at best and detrimental at worst. Moreover, the findings give us insight into the mechanisms driving such responses. It appears that such responses are potentially driven less by a cognitive reassessment of the organization's authenticity than by an emotional reaction to a counternormative claim. As prior researchers have suggested (e.g., Friestad and Wright 1994), this may be because many consumers simply do not have the necessary knowledge to judge the validity of such claims. Even still, these claims appear to elicit affective responses that prompt audience members to rise up against the organizations that make them (Firat and Vekatesh 1995; Holt 2002; Murray and Ozanne 1991). In sum, the findings reported here add to the chorus of others who have warned about the potential backlash of making authenticity self-claims.

We believe that this study also helps us better understand how authenticity is socially constructed among audiences. In most domains in contemporary society, matters of authenticity cannot be settled definitively; instead, they are sorted out through ongoing discourse among observers and the use of language to make (or not make) attributions of authenticity. Managers attempt to craft an image of their organization's authenticity by entering into this dialogue with consumers and other observers. In an existential meaning, authenticity refers to the value of "it is what it claims." Thus, the extent to which authenticity can be fabricated or engineered and retain its appeal raises interesting existential questions, particularly if consumers are aware of these facts. Attempts at openly and blatantly crafting authenticity can backfire, as audiences may regard these attempts as inauthentic. Yet, attributions of authenticity tend to evolve over time as audiences collectively agree on what ought to be considered authentic. Future research might, therefore, usefully examine how these attributions evolve over time as organizations participate in the discourse.

Finally, this study raises questions about the broader theoretical issue of how individuals respond to self-promotional identity claims irrespective of content. One stream of research discussed here has long suggested that individuals are generally skeptical of most promotional claims made by organizations (Boush et al. 1994; Friestad and Wright 1994; Mangleburg and Bristol 1998), with claims frequently causing a cultural backlash (Holt 2002; Murray and Ozanne 1991). The logic driving these assertions is that individuals believe that these claims are motivated by self-interests and, therefore, exaggerated or, worse, untrue (Robinson, Johnson, and Shields 1995; Hoorens et al. 2012). Our findings suggest that consumers experience a personal emotional reaction to such claims as well.

We set out to offer a systematic test of how individuals respond to organizational self-proclamations of authenticity. Essentially, what we have done here is to “establish the phenomenon,” in the words of Merton (1987). We have shown empirically that it is generally contrary to an organization’s self-interest to promote its authenticity unabashedly. Deeper understanding of the subtle and complex interpretations behind the phenomenon can hopefully be addressed in future consumer research on authenticity. Among the priorities for future research would be to drill further down into the possible mechanisms behind the phenomenon. We have offered evidence that self-claims impact ratings cognitively through an emotional as well as cognitive process. However, adjudicating among these and other mechanisms will likely require different research designs and experiments than we have conducted here.

One possible direction to explore in future research involves drilling down into the possible varying meanings of authenticity invoked by individuals. Philosophers and other analysts have long recognized two common—but very different—general meanings of the concept (for reviews, see Carroll and Wheaton 2009; Newman and Smith 2016). The first meaning indicates that an object fits appropriately into a classification for which it has been assigned or someone has claimed for it (e.g., Baugh 1988; Davies 2001). When individuals agree, for example, that the food at a restaurant is authentic French cuisine, this meaning is being invoked. The second common general meaning of authenticity comes from existential philosophy, and carries moral meaning about the values and choices of a producer that are embedded in an object (e.g., Heidegger [1927] 1962; Sartre 1943). A person is said to be authentic, for example, if he or she is sincere, assumes responsibility for his or her actions, and makes explicit value-based choices concerning those actions rather than accepting socially imposed values and actions. In parallel, an organization is authentic to the extent that it embodies the chosen values of its founders, owners, or members rather than simply following convention by, say, pursuing profits. We think it is plausible that consumers will respond differently to organizational self-claims depending on whether those claims concern type versus moral authenticity. We plan to address this issue in future research.

Another possible direction for future research would address the more abstract question noted about the efficacy of organizational identity self-claims generally, going beyond authenticity. To characterize broadly, the concept of organizational identity takes on different meanings in sociological and psychological research; sociologists often use the label to refer to how external audiences view an organization, whereas psychologists tend to use it to refer to how internal members view the organization (for a review and distinctions between “identity,” “image,” and “reputation,” see Brown et al. 2006). While these two views often agree, sometimes they do not. For example, organizational members might view themselves in one way while audiences might view themselves differently (Ibarra 1999; Hatch and Schultz 2002; Gioia, Schultz, and Corley 2000; Brown et al. 2006). Moreover, external audiences tend to make assessments via categorization or classification, whereas inside members tend to develop views of themselves via self-assessment and self-claims (Jenkins 2000). The former may suffer from lack of information about the entity being classified, whereas the latter may suffer from impartial or biased motives. The



relationship between the two is further complicated because organizations often strive to present themselves in ways that evoke a desired identity in the eyes of their audience. These efforts are frequently strategic in nature, and the activities associated with them run the gamut from blatant self-promotional marketing to subtle advertising to informal messaging through social relationships. These self-driven attempts at creating an identity comprise the abstract issue underlying this research project.

Answering the general question of when do obvious attempts at crafting an organizational identity succeed is a long-term research goal, and we find competing claims about it (and associated research) hard to reconcile at the moment (see Goffman 1959; Leary and Kowalski 1990; Ibarra 1999; Jenkins 2000). What seems needed is a specification of the scope conditions for when self-promotion will be effective and when it will not. In attempting to advance this research agenda, we restricted our attention here to a narrower formulation—one about authenticity—that extant empirical research has largely ignored. We believe that focusing on the crucial concept of authenticity allowed us to better understand how audiences respond to organizational attempts to craft and project a particular identity. From that base, we think that future research might advance the agenda further by studying other specific kinds of attributions, which when compared may point to a general scope boundary.

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